

Rare seabird sightings from a pelagic longline vessel off South Africa, July–September 2013

Dominic P. Rollinson

Observations d'oiseaux de mer rares au large de l'Afrique du Sud à partir d'un palangrier en juillet–septembre 2013. L'auteur rapporte des observations d'oiseaux de mer rares ou peu communs, effectuées au large de l'Afrique du Sud pendant un voyage de 79 jours à bord d'un palangrier. La plupart des observations concernent des espèces sub-antarctiques qui sont normalement confinées aux eaux plus froides au sud, mais qui s'aventurent occasionnellement plus au nord, surtout pendant l'hiver et le printemps australs. Quelques espèces qui sont supposées fréquenter les eaux sud-africaines uniquement au passage ont également été notées. Ces observations indiquent que certaines espèces d'oiseaux de mer rares pourraient fréquenter les eaux sud-africaines plus souvent qu'on ne le pensait.

Summary. This paper reports several rare and scarce seabirds recorded off South Africa during a 79-day trip on board a pelagic longline vessel. Most sightings were of subantarctic species that are normally restricted to colder waters further south, but are known to occasionally venture north, especially during the austral winter and spring. A few species which are thought to enter southern African waters only on passage were also observed. These sightings suggest that several rare seabird species may occur more frequently in South African waters than previously thought.

The productive waters off South Africa provide rich foraging opportunities for a number of seabird species (Ryan & Rose 1987). Approximately 60 species of Procellariiformes have been recorded within the southern African subregion, many of which are considered rare vagrants (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Seabird diversity and numbers increase during winter and spring, when numerous subantarctic breeding species escape the colder conditions of high latitudes and forage in the temperate waters off South Africa (Crawford *et al.* 1991). Here I report on rare seabirds observed off South Africa during winter/spring 2013.

Seabirds were recorded opportunistically for 79 days at sea from a pelagic longline vessel operating off South Africa between 1 July and 20 September 2013. Fishing operations were conducted on 62 days, with six days of no fishing due to bad weather. Most sightings were made during hauling operations, when birds congregated behind the vessel to scavenge for bait discards and offal. Additional sightings were made while steaming between fishing grounds (11 days). Fishing operations occurred in three distinct areas: c.400–650 km south-east of Durban (17 days), close offshore to Port Elizabeth (15 days) and c.300–350 km south of Cape Agulhas (36 days) (Fig. 1).

Many sightings were confirmed after studying photographs taken with a digital SLR camera

and a 300-mm telephoto lens. Records of species observed within South African waters and considered national rarities were submitted to, and have been accepted by, the South African National Rarities Committee. For some of the more frequently encountered species (Wandering *Diomedea exulans*, Northern Royal *D. sanfordi* and Southern Royal Albatrosses *D. epomophora* and Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea*) daily counts were conducted which were summed to give a total count for the entire trip. It is probable that the same individuals were seen on different days and the trip totals for these species should therefore be treated with caution.

Locations and dates of sightings of rare and unusual seabird species are summarised in Table 1. Fig. 1 shows the three primary fishing areas as well

Figure 1. Map of route taken during the study, with the South African exclusive economic zone (SA EEZ), 200 m and 1,000 m isobars depicted. The three primary fishing areas are marked as **a** (c.400–650 km south-east of Durban), **b** (close offshore to Port Elizabeth) and **c** (c.300–350 km south of Cape Agulhas).

Carte du trajet suivi pendant l'étude; la zone économique exclusive sud-africaine (SA EEZ) et les isobares de 200 m et 1.000 m sont également marquées. Les trois zones de pêche principales sont indiquées comme **a** (environ 400–650 km au sud-est de Durban), **b** (pas très loin au large de Port Elizabeth) et **c** (environ 300–350 km au sud de Cape Agulhas).

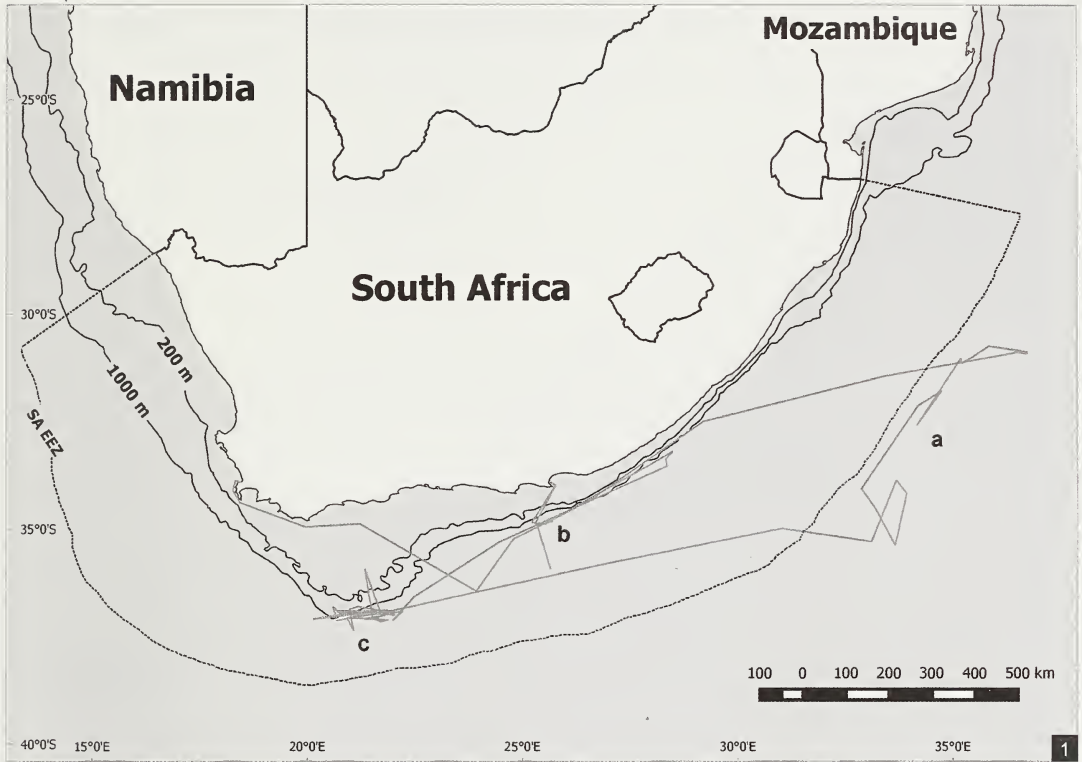


Table 1. Rare seabirds recorded off South Africa, July–September 2013.

Tableau 1. Oiseaux de mer rares observés au large de l'Afrique du Sud en juillet–septembre 2013.

		MONTH			TOTAL	AREA		
		July	August	September		SE of Durban	Agulhas Bank	Port Elizabeth
Wandering Albatross	<i>Diomedea exulans</i>	59	73	10	142	31	98	13
¹ Tristan Albatross	<i>Diomedea dabbenena</i>	2	3	–	5	–	5	–
Northern Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea sanfordi</i>	4	29	9	42	–	39	3
Southern Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea epomophora</i>	2	16	5	23	–	19	4
² Salvin's Albatross	<i>Thalassarche salvini</i>	–	1	–	1	–	1	–
² Grey-headed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche chrysostoma</i>	1	–	–	1	1	–	–
¹ Sooty Albatross	<i>Phoebastria fusca</i>	6	–	–	6	4	–	2
² Light-mantled Albatross	<i>Phoebastria palpebrata</i>	2	–	–	2	2	–	–
¹ Grey Petrel	<i>Procellaria cinerea</i>	22	5	–	27	17	8	2
Spectacled Petrel	<i>Procellaria conspicillata</i>	–	3	–	3	–	3	–
¹ Atlantic Petrel	<i>Pterodroma incerta</i>	–	1	–	1	–	1	–
¹ Blue Petrel	<i>Halobaena caerulea</i>	–	2	2	4	–	2	2
¹ Slender-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	–	1	–	1	–	1	–
Totals		100	135	26	261	55	178	28

¹ Record accepted by the South African National Rarities Committee.

² Recorded in international waters alone.

Table 2. Common seabirds recorded off South Africa, July–September 2013.

Tableau 2. Oiseaux de mer communs observés au large de l'Afrique du Sud en juillet–septembre 2013.

		Abundance	Area
Shy Albatross	<i>Thalassarche cauta / steadi</i>	Seen daily in large numbers	All
Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche carteri</i>	Seen daily in large numbers	All
Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche chlororhynchos</i>	Seen daily in large numbers	All, except east coast
Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	Seen daily but fewer than <i>T. carteri</i>	All
Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Seen on most fishing days	All
Northern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>	Seen on most fishing days	All
Pintado Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>	Seen daily in large numbers	All
White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	Seen daily in large numbers	All
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Seen on most days in low numbers	All
Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>	Seen once	Cape Agulhas
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	Seen on two occasions only	Cape Agulhas
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	Seen once	Cape Agulhas
Great-winged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma macroptera</i>	Seen on most days in low numbers	All
Soft-plumaged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma mollis</i>	Seen on most days in low numbers	All
Antarctic Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	Seen on most days in low numbers	All
Wilson's Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	Seen daily in large numbers	All
Black-bellied Storm-petrel	<i>Fregatta tropica</i>	Seen in small numbers from September	All
Cape Gannet	<i>Morus capensis</i>	Seen in small numbers close to the coast	All, except east coast
Subantarctic Skua	<i>Catharacta antarctica</i>	Seen on most days in low numbers	All
Tern sp.	<i>Sterna</i> sp.	Small flocks seen occasionally	All
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Coastal areas only	All
Hartlaub's Gull	<i>Larus hartlaubii</i>	Coastal areas only	All, except east coast

as the route taken by the vessel. Figs. 2–6 show the location of all rare bird records. Table 2 lists other common species seen throughout the trip with an approximate estimation of abundance as well as area recorded.

Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*

Recorded on 48 of the 79 days at sea. Most common off the Agulhas Bank (seen on 29 of 36 days; Figs. 2 & 7) and less frequent off Port Elizabeth (eight of 15 days) and south-east of Durban (11 of 17 days; Fig. 2). In total, 142 sightings were made, the majority off the Agulhas Bank (c.70%), with smaller numbers south-east of Durban and off Port Elizabeth (Table 1). As many as ten individuals scavenged behind the vessel while fishing off the Agulhas Bank. Largest numbers were in July–August, with smaller numbers in September (Table 1). All plumage stages were seen, from juveniles to almost all-white old adult males.

Wandering Albatrosses breed on subantarctic islands, the nearest being the Prince Edward and

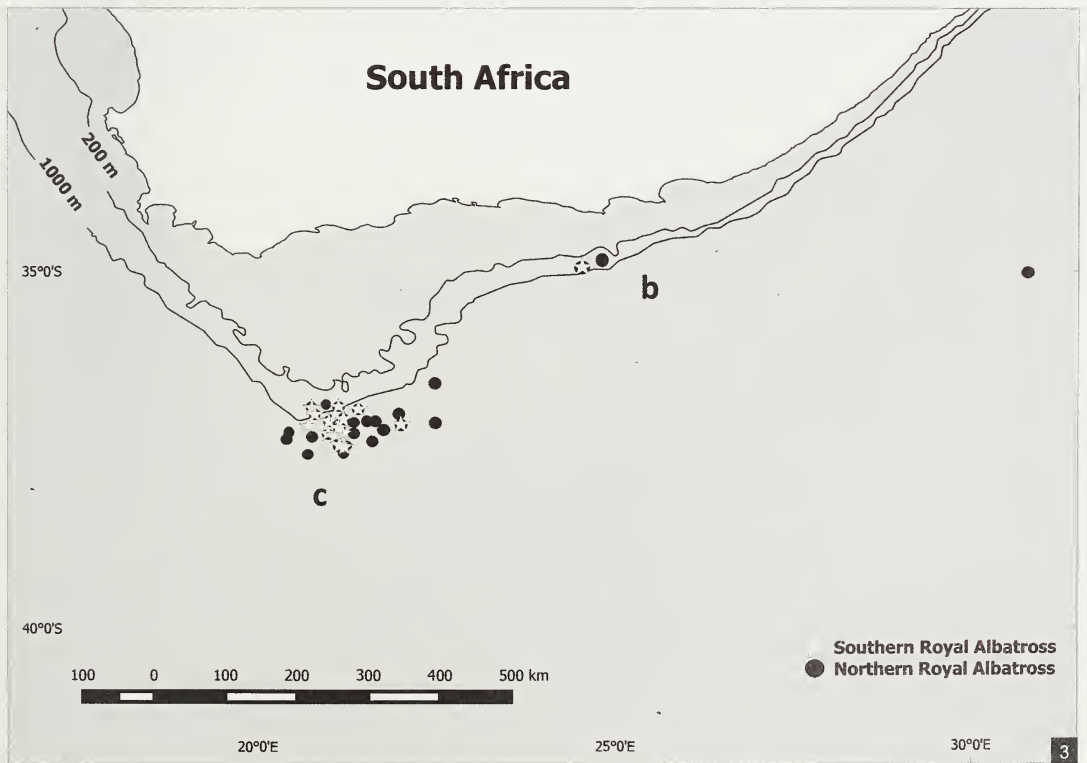
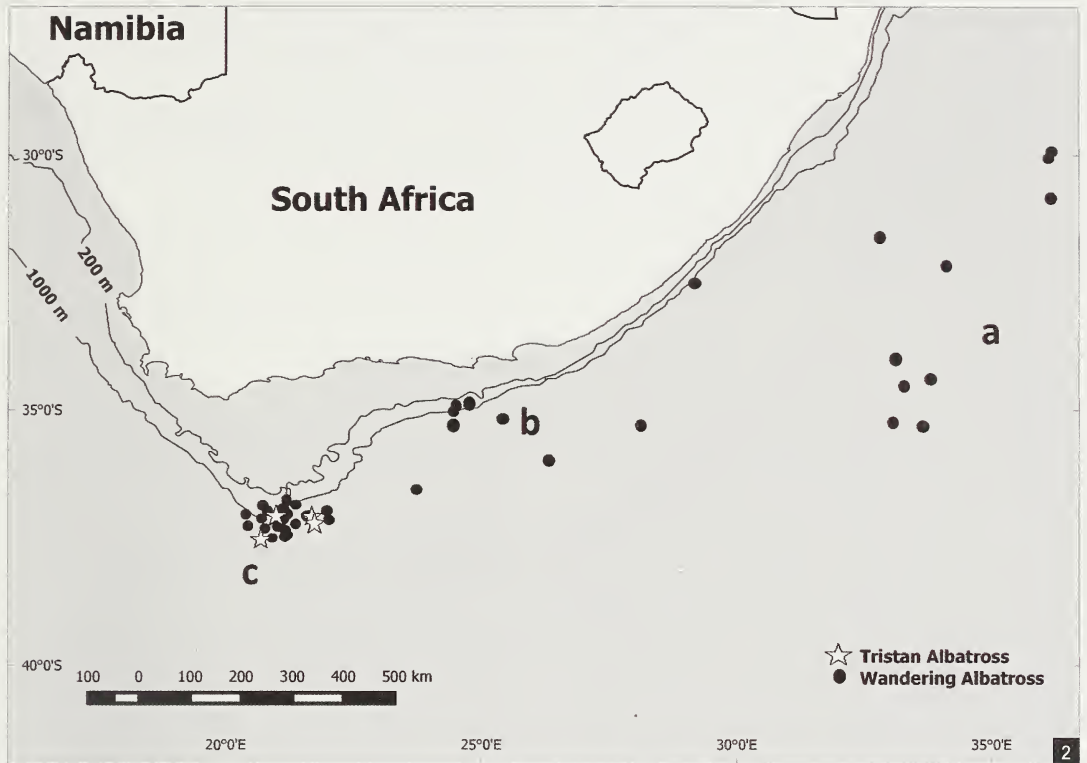
Figure 2. Sightings of Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* and Wandering Albatross *D. exulans* during the study.

Observations de l'Albatros de Tristan *Diomedea dabbenena* et l'Albatros hurleur *D. exulans* pendant l'étude.

Figure 3. Sightings of Southern *Diomedea epomophora* and Northern Royal Albatross *D. sanfordi* during the study.

Observations de l'Albatros royal *Diomedea epomophora* et l'Albatros de Sanford *D. sanfordi* pendant l'étude.

Crozet Islands, the others including Kerguelen, Heard, Macquarie and South Georgia (Shirihai 2007). Post-breeding adults are known to travel from South Georgia to South African waters in 6–10 days (Prince *et al.* 1998). I photographed an immature with a green colour ring c.400 km east of East London, which was probably ringed on Bird Island, South Georgia, as one of the 2011/12 cohort of fledglings (A. Wood pers. comm.). The species is scarce over the continental shelf but is recorded more



regularly in oceanic waters, with most sightings off west and south coasts (Hockey *et al.* 2005). It is observed with some frequency during pelagic birdwatching trips operating from the Cape Peninsula, but numbers have declined in recent years (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Cyrus & Robson (1980) recorded them as frequent visitors to the KwaZulu-Natal coast during the atlas period (1970–80), but there have been very few records in recent years.

Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena*

Four confirmed sightings were made, all south of Cape Agulhas in oceanic waters (Fig. 2), although others might have been confused with Wandering Albatrosses. The birds were separated from Wandering Albatrosses by the presence of a yellow alphanumeric ring (Fig. 7; all unringed *D. exulans* / *dabbenena* were presumed to be *D. exulans*). Ring numbers permitted ageing and sexing. All were adult males 19–35 years old, which had previously bred on Gough Island. Two were failed breeders from 2013, one failed in 2012, while the fourth successfully raised a chick on its last breeding attempt in 2009.

Tristan Albatross is Critically Endangered and endemic to the islands of Gough and Inaccessible, where it is thought to number c.9,000 birds (Shirihai 2007). The population has decreased in recent years, mostly due to longline fishing and the introduction of mice to Gough Island (Wanless *et al.* 2009). The species is considered uncommon in oceanic waters off the west coast and rare elsewhere in the subregion (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Prior to this study, there were only eight confirmed records from southern African waters: five from the west coast of South Africa and Namibia (Hockey *et al.* 2005, Goren & Ryan 2010), one south of Cape Agulhas (B. Rose pers. comm.), one dead bird at Port Elizabeth (Ryan *et al.* 2001) and one killed by a longline vessel off Durban (Cooper 2011). Of these, only three previous sight records (of colour-banded individuals) exist, the other records all involved recoveries of dead birds. Two additional sightings have been made in South African waters since; one south of Cape Point (pers. obs.) and another west of Cape Town (P. Ryan pers. comm.). However, as demonstrated by Reid *et al.* (2013),

Figure 4. Sightings of Salvin's *Thalassarche salvini*, Grey-headed *T. chrystoma*, Sooty *Phoebastria fusca* and Light-mantled Albatross *P. palpebrata* during the study.

Observations de l'Albatros de Salvin *Thalassarche salvini*, l'Albatros à tête grise *T. chrystoma*, l'Albatros brun *Phoebastria fusca* et l'Albatros fuligineux *P. palpebrata* pendant l'étude.

Figure 5. Sightings of Grey *Procellaria cinerea*, Spectacled *P. conspicillata* and Atlantic Petrels *Pterodroma incerta* during the study.

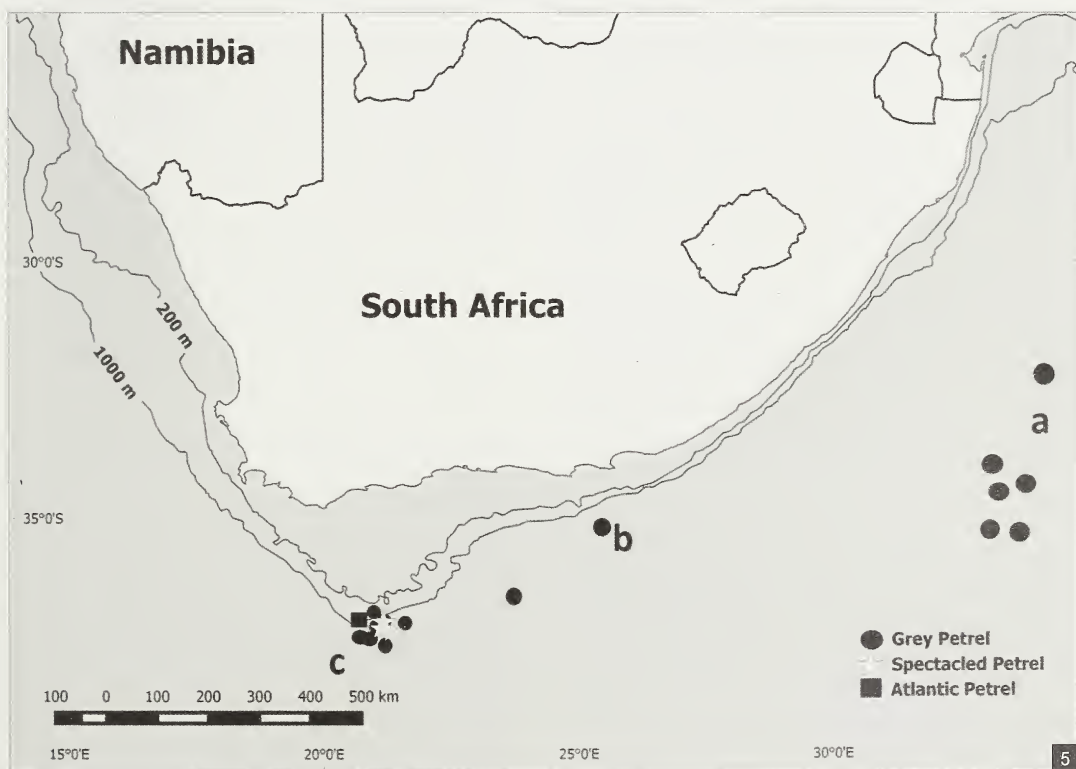
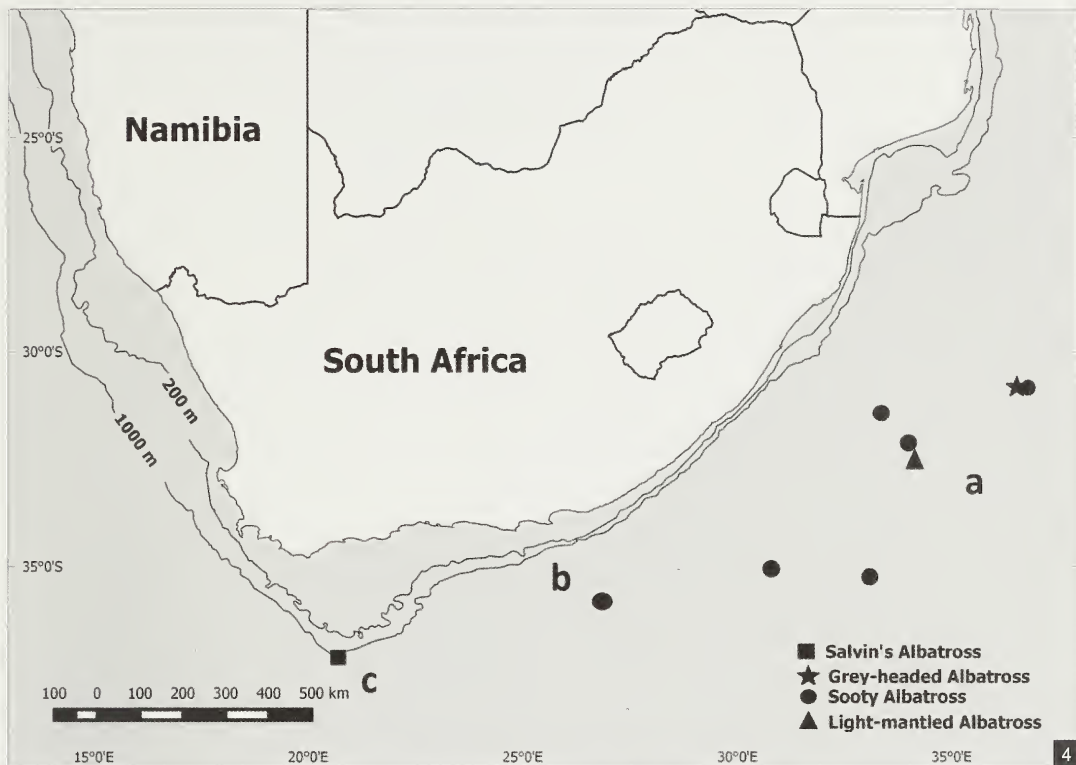
Observations du Puffin gris *Procellaria cinerea*, du Pétrel à lunettes *P. conspicillata* et du Pétrel de Schlegel *Pterodroma incerta* pendant l'étude.

Tristan Albatrosses regularly visit South African waters, particularly non-breeding birds in April–October. Due to the difficulty of separating the species from Wandering Albatross at sea (Ryan 2000), many are presumably overlooked.

Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi*

Forty-two were recorded on 33 days, mainly off the Agulhas Bank in August, with smaller numbers off Port Elizabeth (Table 1; Fig. 7). None was seen south-east of Durban, which is unsurprising as the species has not been recorded from the KwaZulu-Natal coast (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Most sightings were in water >1,000 m deep, although the species was also regularly seen in shallower water off Port Elizabeth in September (Fig. 3). Many were juveniles / younger immatures, separated from adults by the dark brown blotching on the lower back and rump, as well as dark brown flecks on the crown and dark tail tip.

The species is thought to mostly occur off South Africa during passage from its wintering grounds off South America to its breeding grounds off New Zealand (Shirihai 2007). My sightings suggest that it occurs more regularly in oceanic waters off South Africa than previously thought. Northern Royal Albatrosses are regularly recorded in southern African waters, mostly over the continental shelf edge off western and southern coasts (Hockey *et al.* 2005). In recent years they have been recorded in similar numbers to Wandering Albatross over the continental shelf, less frequently in oceanic waters (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Virtually all southern African records are in May–October, although there are records from April and November as well.



Southern Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora*

Recorded on far fewer occasions than the previous species (Fig. 3 & 7), with sightings on 20 days, mainly off the Agulhas Bank in August, with smaller numbers off Port Elizabeth in September (Table 1).

An estimated 8,200–8,600 pairs breed on the New Zealand islands of Campbell and Auckland, and range at sea between 36°S and 63°S (Shirihai 2007). They forage mostly in New Zealand waters, although many also visit seas around southern South America (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

The species is recorded less frequently than Northern Royal Albatross within the subregion and prefers waters >1,000 m deep, beyond the continental shelf edge (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Southern Royal Albatross is recorded annually in southern African waters, mostly in June–October. It appears to be restricted to the south coast of South Africa with no known records further north off the west or east coasts (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

Salvin's Albatross *Thalassarche salvini*

A single immature was recorded off the Agulhas Bank in August (Figs. 4 & 8). Most previous southern African records are of adults, but younger birds may have been overlooked due to their similarity to juvenile / immature 'Shy' Albatross *T. cauta / steadi*.

Most Salvin's Albatrosses breed on New Zealand's subantarctic Snares and Bounty archipelagos. Birds either disperse west to the south-west Indian Ocean or east to western South America in winter (Shirihai 2007). Some seen in the Drake Passage and the south-western Atlantic Ocean may be the source of southern African records (Hockey *et al.* 2005). The species is a rare vagrant to the subregion, with confirmed sightings only since 2000, all from coastal Western Cape waters, with most in winter / spring (Hockey *et al.* 2005, Davis 2006).

Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma*

A single juvenile was observed on two consecutive days c.400 km south-east of Durban in mid July while scavenging behind the vessel (Fig. 4).

Grey-headed Albatrosses breed throughout the circumpolar subantarctic islands, the nearest colonies being on the Prince Edward and Crozet groups. They are found most frequently over colder waters south of 40°S, although a few birds,

mainly juveniles, wander north to 25°S (Hockey *et al.* 2005, Shirihai 2007). The species is recorded within the southern African subregion in most years, but not annually (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Almost all records are of juveniles and most are from the Western Cape in May–October, with fewer from Eastern Cape and exceptionally from KwaZulu-Natal, Namibia and southern Angola (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria fusca*

Only recorded in July, with four of the six birds south-east of Durban (Table 1). Three of these were seen in international waters (during hauling operations), one in South African waters c.20 km south-east of Durban (Fig. 9) and two together off Port Elizabeth while steaming to the Agulhas Bank (Fig. 4). All were in oceanic waters >1,000 m deep. One showed patchy grey colouring on the mantle and head, which is typical of immatures (Shirihai 2007), whereas all of the others were thought to be adults, based on plumage coloration.

Most Sooty Albatrosses breed on Gough, Tristan da Cunha and the Prince Edward Islands, ranging throughout the Southern Ocean, preferring deeper waters north of the Antarctic Convergence Zone and south of 30°S (Shirihai 2007). It is from these principal breeding grounds that most southern African records are thought to originate. The species is suspected to occur year-round in South African waters off south and south-west coasts (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Occasionally birds have been sighted further north off the east coast, off KwaZulu-Natal, exceptionally as far north as southern Mozambique. Most records closer inshore have been in winter, most probably vagrants to the shelf-break and slope (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*

Two sightings were made one week apart (thought to be the same individual) in international waters south-east of Durban (Fig. 4), during hauling operations. Once the bird followed the vessel, presumably waiting for offal discards (Fig. 10).

Light-mantled Albatrosses have a circumpolar breeding distribution on subantarctic islands, the nearest being the Prince Edwards and Crozets. They generally disperse south of 35°S, but wander further north off the west coast of South America (Onley & Schofield 2007). The species is a rare

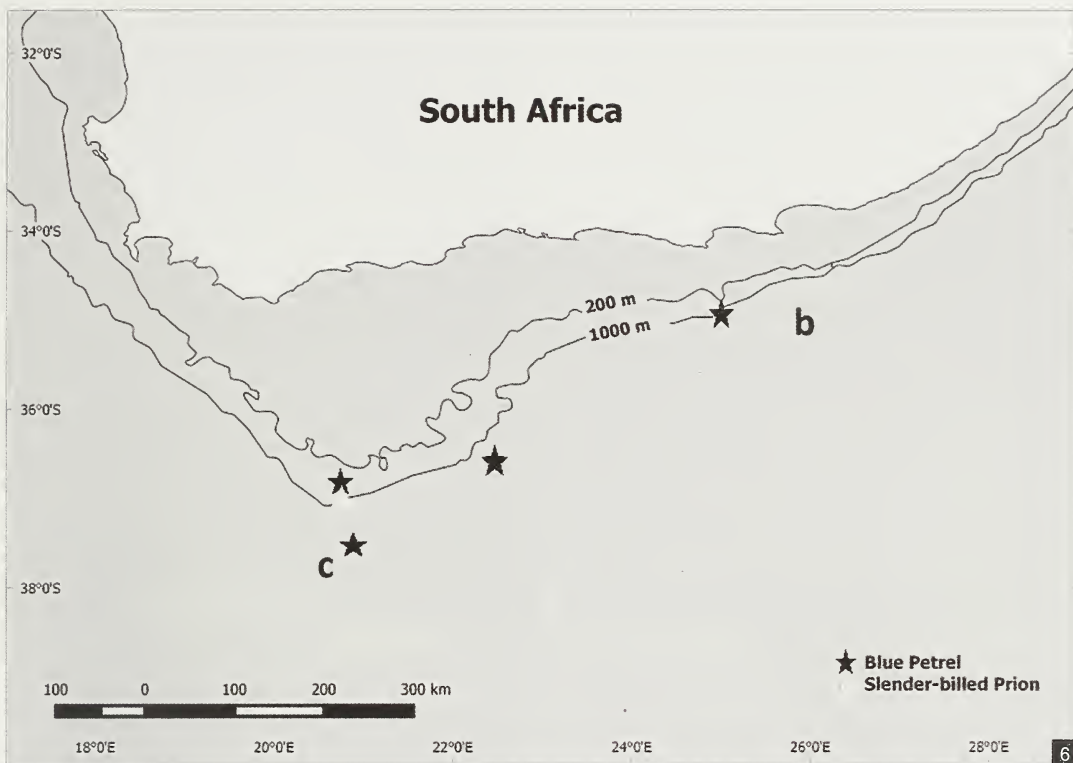


Figure 6. Sightings of Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea* and Slender-billed Prion *Pachyptila belcheri* during the study. Observations du Prion bleu *Halobaena caerulea* et du Prion de Belcher *Pachyptila belcheri* pendant l'étude.

vagrant to southern African waters, with fewer than ten records to date (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Most are from the Western Cape in winter, with some stranded birds. Three are from the east coast: two stranded birds from southern Mozambique and the other from north-eastern KwaZulu-Natal (Hockey *et al.* 2005, Davis 2010).

Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea*

Of the 27 sightings, 22 were made in July; the majority were south-east of Durban (17 on six days; Figs. 5 & 11). As many as six were seen behind the vessel during hauling operations and the species was frequently observed diving for bait discards and offal. Seven sightings of eight birds were made during the 36 days spent fishing off the Agulhas Bank (Fig. 5).

Grey Petrels are winter breeders, with the nearest substantial breeding populations on Gough and the Prince Edward Islands; although they forage as far north as 25°S, they mainly remain south of 35°S (Onley & Schofield 2007). The species is considered rare in southern African

waters, with most records from the south and west coasts in winter (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Records from the east coast are even rarer, although there have been a few records off KwaZulu-Natal in recent years (Davis 2011, 2015).

Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria conspicillata*

Three singles were encountered off the Agulhas Bank in August (Fig. 5), where they scavenged for bait discards and offal behind the vessel during hauling operations.

Spectacled Petrel is endemic as a breeder to Inaccessible Island in the Tristan da Cunha group, and is listed as Vulnerable with only 14,400 breeding pairs (Ryan *et al.* 2001). It ranges throughout the South Atlantic, mostly at 25–41°S (Hockey *et al.* 2005). It is an uncommon visitor to South African waters, mainly preferring oceanic waters up to the shelf edge, mostly off the west coast, with one record from KwaZulu-Natal (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Encountered year-round on pelagic trips from the Cape Peninsula (<http://www.zestforbirds.co.za>).



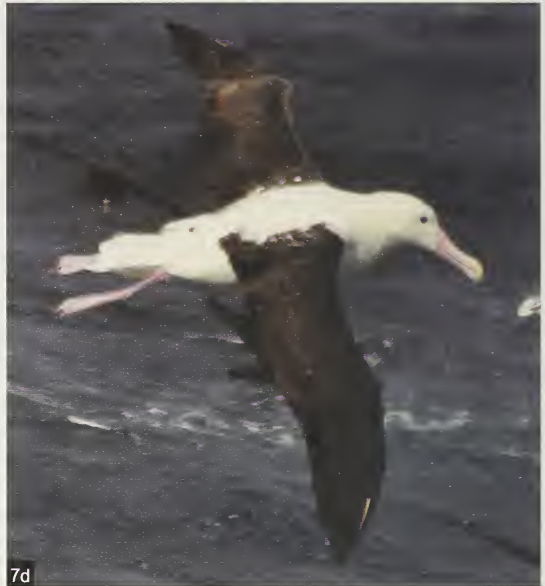
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Figure 7. *Diomedea* albatrosses observed off South Africa, July–September 2013: (a) Wandering Albatross *D. exulans*, (b) Tristan Albatross *D. dabbenena*, (c) Southern Royal Albatross *D. epomophora* and (d) Northern Royal Albatross *D. sanfordi* (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Albatros du genre *Diomedea* observés au large de l’Afrique du Sud en juillet–septembre 2013 : (a) Albatros hurleur *D. exulans*, (b) Albatros de Tristan *D. dabbenena*, (c) Albatros royal *D. epomophora* et (d) Albatros de Sanford *D. sanfordi* (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Atlantic Petrel *Pterodroma incerta*

One was briefly observed during rough weather in August when fishing operations had been suspended, c.230 km south of Cape Agulhas in oceanic water (Fig. 5).

Atlantic Petrel is endemic to the Tristan da Cunha group and Gough Island, chiefly dispersing west to the central and south-western Atlantic (Shirihai 2007). Records from the Indian Ocean are rare, but individuals have been recorded as far as 104°E (Enticott 1991). The species is a rare visitor to South African waters, mostly south-west

of Cape Town, in July–November, with just two records off the east coast, in August 1973 and September 1974 (Sinclair 1974, Cyrus & Robson 1980, Hockey *et al.* 2005).

Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea*

Four were observed in southern African waters (Figs. 6 & 12), three off the Agulhas Bank in August (two in water >1,000 m deep) and one off Port Elizabeth in September (also in water >1,000 m deep). Three of the four briefly followed the vessel during hauling operations.



Figure 8. Immature Salvin's Albatross *Thalassarche salvini*, south of Cape Agulhas, 16 August 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Albatros de Salvin *Thalassarche salvini* immature, au sud de Cape Agulhas, 16 août 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Figures 9–10. Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria fusca*, 11 July 2013 and Light-mantled Albatross *P. palpebrata*, south-east of Durban, 20 July 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Albatros brun *Phoebastria fusca*, 11 juillet 2013 et Albatros fuligineux *P. palpebrata*, au sud-est de Durban, 20 juillet 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)



Blue Petrels have a circumpolar breeding distribution on Southern Ocean islands with the nearest populations nesting on the Prince Edwards and Crozets (Shirihai 2007). Young birds are thought to wander prior to breeding (Shirihai 2007), perhaps accounting for some of the vagrants to the subregion. Blue Petrels are rare winter visitors to southern African waters, but are prone to major irruptions, during which they can occur in large numbers (Ryan *et al.* 1989). The last major irruption was July–August 1984 when 76 were ‘wrecked’ on beaches across South Africa, coinciding with wrecks in Brazil and Australasia (Ryan *et al.* 1989). Observations at sea off the Northern and Western Cape prior to this wreck indicated that the irruption preceded the wreck by some weeks (Ryan *et al.* 1989). Since 1984 there have been very few sightings in South

African waters, with only one bird seen on Cape Point pelagic trips (B. Rose pers. comm.); the few other sightings have been in deeper waters further offshore.



Figure 11. Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea*, south-east of Durban, 20 July 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Puffin gris *Procellaria cinerea*, au sud-est de Durban, 20 juillet 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Figure 12. Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea*, south of Port Elizabeth, 2 September 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Prion bleu *Halobaena caerulea*, au sud de Port Elizabeth, 2 septembre 2013 (Dominic P. Rollinson)



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Slender-billed Prion *Pachyptila belcheri*

A single was observed behind the vessel amongst Antarctic Prions *P. desolata* during hauling operations south of Cape Agulhas in water >1,000 m deep (Fig. 6).

Slender-billed Prions breed on subantarctic islands including the Falklands, Crozets and Kerguelen (Shirihai 2007). The origin of southern African birds is unknown, but is thought to be Kerguelen (Hockey *et al.* 2005). The species is a rare visitor to continental shelf waters, with small numbers seen in most years off the Cape Peninsula (Hockey *et al.* 2005). During the 1984 seabird irruption large numbers of 'wrecked' Slender-billed Prions were washed up on South African beaches, from the Northern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal (Ryan *et al.* 1989). Due to its similarity with other prion species, it is probable that many are overlooked.

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DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa. E-mail: domrollinson@gmail.com

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